

“Close But No Cigar”

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7 May 2017 + Gaithersburg Presbyterian Church

John 10:1-10 + Revelation 13:11-18 = discerning the truth

At University I enrolled in an upper level Bible class called Apocalyptic Literature. Of prime interest it included the Book of Revelation. When we got to Revelation 13 Dr. Gammie described how the 666, the Mark of the Beast represents the epitome of evil. Dr. Gammie then explained how the 666 was the arithmetic sum of the values of a person's name based on a simple encryption technique where alpha = 1, beta = 2 and so forth.



Now across the seminar table was another rather competitive student of more fundamental theology. As this particular seminar progressed, he could be seen scribbling frantically. Soon with a smile of triumph, he shoved a scrap of paper across the table proving that “Jay Losher” equals 666. Naturally I took up the challenge, and just as he had, by modifying the cypher I could make his name come out to 666. I wrote it out, beaming as if I had actually accomplished something, and shoved it back across the table to him.

Now you know what Bible students do for fun.

I am willing to bet that few here have ever heard the 666, the Mark of the Beast preached about in a Presbyterian Church. You're in good company ~ Martin Luther wanted to rip the entire book out of the Bible. Revelation 13 is considered the scariest chapter of the scariest book of the Bible. So your insane pastor is stepping where few dare to tread.



Yet seemingly so fear filled with such overwhelming, dreadful images, Revelation is actually a book of wise counsel and deep hope in times just such as ours, only written in code language that takes careful interpretation.

The Book of Revelation dates from a period in the 1st Century when the infant Christian community was under intense persecution. 666 the Mark of the Beast is a reference to Nero one of the worst torturers of Christians. Nero's name in Greek, **Νερον Καισαρ** does sum up to 666. In contrast, **Ιησους Χριστος** in Greek sums to 888.

In Hebrew numerology the number 7 represented completion, perfection. 6 in contract would be interpreted as almost but just short of righteous perfection. 666 thus represents evil masquerading as good. Close but no cigar. Jesus Christ, 888 on the other hand would by the same logic be perfection plus, the epitome of righteousness. 888 wins first prize every time.



close, but
no cigar

That expression “close but no cigar” has an interesting origin. It means “Falling just short of a successful outcome and getting nothing for your efforts.” The phrase dates from the mid-20th century in the US when fairground stalls gave out cigars as prizes.¹ The phrase came to

be said to all those who failed to win a prize² regardless of the prize in question.

Returning to the First Century, 666 and the expression “close but no cigar” are ingeniously appropriate. The Roman Emperors of the era declared themselves to be gods. Not the gods’ representative, but gods ~ an abomination to both Christians and Jews ~ a blasphemy strictly forbidden by the First Commandment from the only real God there is.



The early Christians refused to worship the Emperor, resulting in severe persecution. Some Roman Emperors tried to exterminate Christianity by falsely accusing Christians of being seditious and unpatriotic for refusing to worship the God Emperors of Rome.



The Book of Revelation was actually written not to frighten us, but rather to offer encouragement and hope to persecuted Christians. In Revelation, the emperors’ claim to

be gods was coded in the symbol 666 ~ meaning discern carefully: the emperors claim righteous authority, even claim godlike power, but in actuality fall disastrously short. While the Emperors may pretend to be gods, they are mere usurpers. They may appear close, but unfortunately no prize for false divinity.

Allan Boesak a widely respected South African theologian, prime author of our Belhar Confession, was a keynote preacher at the 1984 GA of the PCUSA. I was fortunate to hear him when he cautioned us not to speculate about the 666. For example, we shouldn't observe that Ronald Reagan was born on the 6th day of the 6th month of 1906. Just don't do that.



It was not the intention of Revelation for us like bored Bible students to try and pin the number 666 on someone we don't like. Its message for us is far more profound than that. Revelation 13 is less about predicting the future and much more a powerful caution not to believe everyone or everything claiming to be from God, moral and upright. Check any such claims carefully.

close, but
no cigar

In times of crisis, many will come claiming God's wisdom and righteous authority, but better for us to be very cautious, be wise and discerning what and who are really from God. The Devil can quote Scripture to serve profoundly ungodly purposes. There will always be those who claim to be from God but fall short.

It is very easy for us to be deceived by the culture around us claiming divine sanction for practices profoundly ungodly. Never forget that during the 1910's and '20's the KKK was considered respectable and White Citizens' Councils ran Dallas and many other cities with the express purpose of keeping African Americans disenfranchised, undereducated and poor. Evil does often parade as good, moral, upright and patriotic.

The Beast strives for us to worship the wrong things ~ the nation, the common culture. The Beast wants to distract us from following Jesus by substituting lesser goals. Good sincere Christians can be diverted into

worshiping the church building, attendance numbers, church budgets, the latest big program ~ and thus missing the true purpose.

Jesus himself spoke of the essentially same moral dilemma when in John 10 Jesus said: **“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit.”**



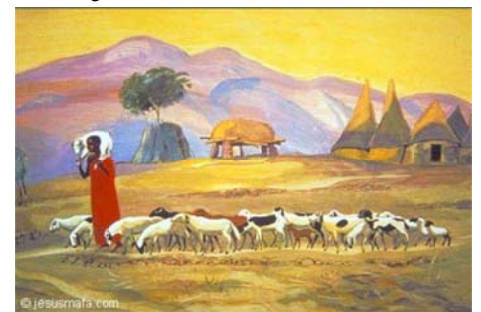
This dilemma is as close as our daily newsfeed. Just 3 days ago there was a phishing attack on Google Docs ~ that's 'phishing' with a 'ph.' The news was all full of impenetrable explanations involving passwords, tokens and Open Authorization protocols, but all you really need to know is:

“If a password is a key locking your account's doors, [then Open Authorization] is [the] doorman who has the keys and ... gets tricked into letting other people in.”³

A door is a gate, so a doorman would be the gatekeeper of which Jesus spoke: **“The gatekeeper opens the gate for [the shepherd]”** In contrast Jesus says anyone who **“climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit.”** We know from both Revelation 13 and the Google Docs attack that the thief can have forged credentials, appears to be legitimate, and may fool most of the people most of the time.

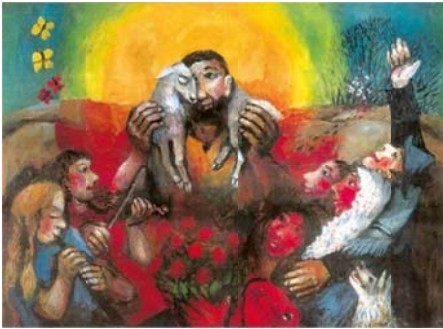
Jesus purposes the solution to our dilemma. He states that his sheep recognize his voice. They respond to his voice calling them out and they follow him. He continues:

“[the sheep do] not follow a stranger, but they will run from [the bandit] because they do not [recognize] the voice of strangers.”



Susan returned to a school where she had previously subbed in a class which included a visually impaired student. The next time around Susan

saw him in the hall and said hello to him. He responded, “Mrs. Losher.” He knew all his teachers by their voices, even when he had only had one class with Susan. Shouldn’t we do as well?



Jesus’ faithful sheep are equipped to discern true leaders from false. Even when the voice is a good imitation, using the right pitch, gentle inflections, all the good-sounding terms, all the right Bible quotes. Discerning disciples are not easily deceived by the false voices vying for our attention, which strive to divert us

from God’s claim and call.

Jesus’ sheep can distinguish the “close but no cigar” from the real, true and living Good Shepherd calling us to follow him out of the safe sheepfold into ministry in the world.



¹ Cf. <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/close-but-no-cigar.html>

² Cf. https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/close,_but_no_cigar

³ Cf. https://www.cnet.com/how-to/why-the-google-docs-scam-was-a-different-kind-of-phishing/?google_editors_picks=true